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The Struggle for Space: Minority Religious Identities in Post-Independent Kenya

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Introduction

Despite differences in religious integration there is a tendency by many countries to allow some religions to have an upper hand (Ibid). In Britain, for example, the Anglican faith is universalized at the expense of the existing religious diversity (Beckford, 1999). The marginalization of minority religious identities by the former colonial powers was duplicated in the colonies that they occupied. By so doing, the process of national homogenization necessarily eluded historical, social and cultural differences among the colonized people of Africa.

The nature of the contemporary African state is largely due to the colonial era, when administrators employed religion tactically in their pursuit of religious political domination. Missionary activities were an important facet of attempted colonial cultural domination, with both repressive and liberal functions. They were agents of both European superiority and political domination and the agents of modernization especially western education.

Most African countries became independent in the 1960s on a surge of optimism. The new governments set to work without an effective model other than Western one. Before long, however, the optimism of early 1960s turned sour because the African state had merely become an agency for control and extraction. There was no attempt to merge the state and society as common expressions of shared values. Hence there has been no popular commitment to public institutions like the church/religion.

The trend of lack of integration of religious minority groups in the nation state narration continued in most former colonies in Africa after independence. In Kenya, the post-colonial state was essentially a reproduction of the colonial state in terms of ideological orientation, laws and the basic economic structures (Gutto, 1993: 265). It therefore ignored the illiterate fighters of the *Mau Mau* movement that had been instrumental in the liberation struggle. They were excluded from central manipulation of policy issues and control of power due to the perceived association of its adherents with the indigenous religion of the Agikuyu that missionaries and colonialists disliked (Kenyatta, 1968). Such

suspicion by the state regarding members of indigenous oriented religious minority groups still persists to date.

Apart from the mainline churches and indigenous groups, religious diversity exists in Kenya in other words the religious space and the public realm is shared. Despite the diversity of religious identities the government of Kenya seems to give more attention to the mainline Christian churches and some brotherhoods of Islam. Consequently, minority religious identities seem to be subordinated against, a fact that impinges on the human rights of some citizens of Kenya. This scenario has at times generated violent sectarian confrontations. The contest between the nation and these minority religious identities generate serious implications on issues of democracy, human rights, and freedom as well as on citizenship. The re-emergence of minority religious identities in public life in recent times has brought the pleas for recognition of their values and identities given that they seem to lack space for fruitful participation in national affairs.

Although freedom of worship is embodied in the Kenyan constitution, there are no existing policies in the relations between religion and the affairs of state.¹ And yet religion and politics in any nation concern each other. Hence it would be stated that the separation of religion and state in the individual national context is usually one of theoretical degree rather than practical certainty. Religion and the nation state are power centres, bound to affect each other a great deal given the nature of African politics with its personalisation of issues and then, often close relationship between socio-economic elites.

This paper interrogates the contest between the Kenyan state and the religious discourses, specifically, the minority religious discourses in order to establish whether or not the post colonial Kenyan state has accommodated their interests since independence. In particular, it focuses on the dynamics of accommodation and exclusion which inform the relationship between the state and the minority religious discourses that operate on its margins. It also examines how the existence of minority religious identities has enhanced

¹ Jeff Haynes 1996. Religion and Practices in Africa. (East Africa Educational Publishers, Nairobi).

or threatened the stability of the state and the various methods they use to assert themselves as they look for space within the nation.

Examples of the marginalized religious identities are African Independent Churches and African Indigenous religious groups. With or without the mainline religious groups the Kenyan religious space is shared and vehemently contested. Given the large number of minority religious groups in Kenya this paper only tackles the marginalized religious group categorized as African Indigenous religious groups (Dini Ya Msambwa, Tent of the Living God and Mungiki) within this space.

It is assumed in this paper that the interest of the Kenyan state is political stability hence the position of various religious groups remain ambivalent and ambiguous. The ambivalence of the state and its negative responses to the minority religious groups has often led to negative externalities such as intolerance and aggression that may afflict the society. Hence the indigenous religious groups remain suspect in spite of state efforts to accommodate them. Open or hidden conflicts have been characteristics of the state when it has ignored or suppressed certain minority identities. It is obvious that despite the coexistence of the minority religious groups and the state, they have had numerous grievances, thwarted hopes, state manipulation that causes them to voice their marginality. Finally given the awkward backgrounds of the minority religious groups they do not have discourses on critical issues such as democracy, human rights and citizenship hence they are easily manipulated and become useful tools to the government but sometimes their responses are met with negotiations or severe reprimands and occasionally violence.

Why would there be a fight for space? In Sub-Saharan Africa, the brief duration of colonisation resulted in a form of state power which on the surface and theoretically resembled European institutions, but in practice was quite different. Alternative centres of independent power are rare, the acquisition and use of state power for political purposes result in the holder(s) becoming rich. Those associated with the state including some semi-religious figures, may use their positions for personal benefits and their

religious groups corporately. Some religious leaders quite often enjoy cordial relations with the political authorities. If there are benefits in the public realm then definitely all must pursue them. Thus the minority religions are seeking the collective common space where all are equal, at home and exercise the basic freedoms. This public space seems to have been privatised and yet the privatization of public space is an attempt to diminish the democratic dreams of ordinary citizens and to make them forget that they had power and basic rights. This means that the position of the state can be quite ambivalent and very exclusive.

Conceptualizing the State-Religious Relations

Religious practices have a critical bearing on the political interests of the state. It is against this background that some religious identities in Africa have enjoyed more positive political and state attention than others giving rise to the dichotomous notion of minority and dominant religious discourses within the African state. It is argued that Kenya is not an exception to the general African experience. It is therefore a battlefield of numerous religious outfits, all of them struggling to gain recognition, attention and favour from the state. The state itself maintains an ambivalent stance.

Contemporary Kenyan state was born out of European colonialism in Africa. It maintained the fundamental tenets of the West with regard to law, economics and political organization and consequently became a tool of Western control, domination and exploitation of the Kenyan people.² Control, domination and exploitation were, in turn, supported by powerful Christian religious principles propagated by various denominations including the Catholic and Protestant movements. At the heart of the teachings of these Christian denominations were deliberate efforts to belittle African cultural values. The denominations assisted the state in privileging and recommending Western variants of development. In a sense, colonialism in Kenya failed to distinguish the state from the church hence both the state and the church played complimentary roles.

² Berman 1990

At independence, the western style in Kenya remained intact both in structure and content apart from the fact that colonialism had officially been Africanized (Kisiang'ani 2003).³ The same Christian denominations which had been recognized and privileged by formal colonialism continued to play similar and dominant roles under the arrangement of informal colonialism. Christian denominations such as the Catholics and mainstream Protestants and mainstream Islamic groups influenced the direction of affairs within the newly independent state. The result has been that more and more religious sects especially the indigenous African religions, the African instituted churches and the non-conformist Islamic sects have become marginalized. The list of marginalized religious discourses in Kenya is almost endless but they include *Hema ya Ngai Wi Moyo* (Tent of the Living God), *Mungiki and Dini ya Musambwa*.

Two challenges have emerged. First the local population expressed their disgust and local anger found expression in the emergent religious diversities most of them opposed to the mainstream religious groups in Africa. Second, the ruling elites have found themselves endangered by threats of violence and civil strife emanating from opposition caused by minority identities. Consequently, frustrated by their failure to accommodate diversity, or at least strike a middle ground, these elites have tended to give overwhelming acceptance and support to dominant religious discourses, which are harmonious with classical Western modernity, as they suppress minority voices which are viewed as inimical to the survival of both the state and the ruling elite.

Within the paradigm of critiquing modernity, it goes without saying that European Christian religion is just one of the many religious practices spread all over the world. It is hence untenable to privilege either European Catholicism or Protestantism over the traditional religious practices. Yet it is evident that modern colonialism was a deliberate European modernist agenda to Westernize, exploit and control non-European inhabitants. Through the same agenda, European values including, religious practices were imposed on the colonies in the name of spreading superior civilization. As a result newly created

³ Kisiang'ani 2003

entities like Kenya came to adopt the ‘universal’ practices of Catholicism and Protestantism.

However, in the post-modern spirit of questioning the tenability of Western modernity, a different group of scholars, emerging from formerly colonized spaces, have put more pressure on Western civilization. The scholars have made their impression through the emergent post-colonialist thinking. Apart from focusing their general attention on the relevance of the Western-bred nation-state in formerly colonized areas, postcolonial thinkers have interrogated specific perspectives and challenges within the post-colonies. For example, some of these scholars have explored the ways in which minority discourses contest the exclusionary tendencies of national consolidation.⁴ In Kenya, like in a many post colonies, national consolidation has seemingly been accompanied by the privileging of certain religious identities, on the one hand, and the suppressing of some other religious groups that are viewed to be on the margins of the nation narration on the other hand.

It is evident, from research that, such religious groups as the Catholics, the mainstream Protestants and some Muslim sects have been privileged to the extent that they operate at the centre of the nationalist narrative while the indigenous religions and others operate on the periphery of the nation narration. Significantly, the process of national consolidation based on the privileging and suppressing of certain religious groups reflects the cultural continuity from the colonial to the post independence dispensation yet the existence of religious differences also implies a differential articulation of cultural differences. Minority religious discourses are thus sites of resistance to hybridity, diversity and difference. Consequently, resistance against national homogeneity remains one of the leading challenges to the stability of the state.

Essentially, post colonialists propose that Africa’s development problems have been caused by its cultural and intellectual dependency on the West. Therefore, taking the contest to the field of culture, the post-colonial theoretical scholars insist that formerly

⁴ Amoko, 2000, p.1

colonized *others* should radically rethink forms of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by the West.⁵ In this paper it is argued that in its post-independence dispensation, the Kenyan nation state has been defined and informed by forms of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by the West. Consequently, forms of knowledge and social identities that do not fit in the homogenizing and normalizing experience of Kenya have been subverted, raising serious concerns about the rights and privileges of some citizens.

But the notion of ‘post colony’ is controversial and its mention raises the question of when, indeed, the postcolonial experience began. According to Linda Hutcheon, the ‘post’ in the postcolonial may imply ‘after’ because of colonialism; it may also be unavoidably inclusive of colonialism. In this regard, the postcolonial designates moments within colonialism and beyond.⁶ However, Achille Mbembe argues that the notion of ‘post colony’ signifies a given historical trajectory – that of societies recently emerging from the experience colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship, par-excellence, involves.⁷ In its complete arrangement, the African post colony has two major battles to fight. First, it has to continue struggling against the Western hegemonic tendencies which have little relevance to local conditions and, second, it has to contend with local problems which threaten its own stability. The Kenyan post colony is not an exception to this plain reality. The post colony is, today, confronted with the problematic of hegemonic colonial proclivities which have consummated the cultural ‘universals’ of Western modernity on the one hand, and the increasing pressure of local diversities on the other hand. Minority religious discourses have hence opened up critical sites of contestation. Thus the post colony is chaotically pluralistic and lacking in internal unity and consistency

Consequently, the post colony tries to survive internal and external pressures by adopting a political improvisation characterized by regime violence, discrimination against minority identities and the general privileging of certain discourses. Essentially, the

⁵ Prakash, 1998, p.8

⁶ Linda Hutcheon 1995:10

⁷ Achille Mbembe 1992:4

operations of state power in Kenya have been exclusionist because identities which have been deemed to be outside the 'socio-historical world' and the world of 'common sense' have been suppressed, marginalized or ignored. Such identities (in this case religious identities) have been given new meanings that only help to isolate them from the 'real world' of 'common sense'. It is important to remember that the African post colony is also made up of corporate institutions and a political machinery which, once in place, constitute a regime of violence that tends not only to sustain the dominant discourses and identities which are friendly to the state, but also suppresses those identities that are considered dangerous or unsuitable to the stability of the nation-state.⁸

It has to be observed that the colonial state was fundamentally established and maintained by a well-defined regime of violence.⁹ Colonial violence served, among other things, to subvert indigenous cultural values at the expense of the incoming European social values. As a result, most African discourses that narrated the African reality were condemned to a minority status. In their place, Western social –political, economic and religious systems were implanted, highlighted and accorded the status of dominance. The entire transformation process was the work of violence in both its psychological and physical forms. The cultural teachings of the Western colonial advocates downgraded the African values by preaching the superiority of Western civilization. Thus, as colonialism tiled its roots in Africa the African people lost the war of defending their socio-cultural systems. Indeed, those who espoused Western lifestyles and religious practices were rewarded and appointment by the colonial system. Where the psychological war was not won, the European colonialists used force to claim obedience and compliance.

Clearly then, the onset of political independence marked not just the continuity of the process of marginalizing the discourses of the African cultural reality but also the uninterrupted domination of European discourses imposed to the social reality in Africa. This was because the new African leadership that took power at independence had not just been educated in Western-European values but had already permanently succumbed

⁸ Mbembe 1982, 1991, Geoffrey 1990

⁹ Fanon, 1967: p. 30-71

to the psychological violence of European colonialism. It is therefore no wonder that the same social discourses which were subverted under formal colonialism received similar treatment under African governments.

But these minority identities have hardly accepted their inferior status. Cases abound where these identities have hit back, sometimes violently in an effort to claim a dominant role. This has occurred because being at the periphery of the national narrative does not just imply cultural isolation. Rather it also signifies loss of access to the social, economic and political commodities which the nation-state creates and distributes. Thus, the struggle against peripheralization has also been the struggle for empowerment. In Kenya, there exists massive documentary evidence, especially between 1995 and now about the struggle between the government and minority religious identities such as the *Mungiki*, and the *Tent of the Living God*.¹⁰ Other religious groups such as DYM (the religion of our culture) have had their adherents permanently opposing the western influenced political and cultural policies in Kenya.

Despite suppression from the dominating institutions in Kenya the minority religious groups have continued to thrive. The struggle between these discourses and the dominant narratives of the nation has been protracted and sometimes violent. But this struggle, too, represents deliberate efforts by the marginalized identities to free themselves from the exclusionist tyranny. Most importantly, members of these marginalized groups have fought to be accommodated at the centre of the nation-narration so as to gain access to the social, economic and political commodities hitherto denied.

Mainstream religious organisations and the state

Historically, in Kenya the politics of religious freedom more directly interacts with national politics in part due to the instability of Kenyan politics. The words of Cherry Gertzel suffice. He says

Every state that has moved from colonialism to independence has sought to shape its inherited institutions to the changing circumstances and ideas of that

¹⁰ Peter Kagwanja, 2002, Several issues of the Daily Nation, Sunday Nation papers in June 2004

independence seeking to move away from the colonial past they are concerned with adapting their political system to the needs of the independent society. But new states often like to seem newer than in fact they can be, for they all have to work within an inherited framework which is more difficult to change than it might appear.¹¹

Before examining the state and minority religions in contemporary Kenya an analysis of the colonial era is requisite. To this end it is argued that the roots of contemporary relationships between religious groups and the state can be traced back to the period of the European colonialism which lasted from 1895 to 1963. During this time, there was clear affinity between Christian missionaries and colonial administrators and this as Haynes says “did not rest solely on their shared ‘Christian-ness’, as it were but was also bolstered by their shared European ness’.¹² That is to say, even though Christian officials and missionaries may on occasion have been unhappy with certain aspects of colonial policy, there were generally many more points of agreements, than disagreements between religious and secular colonial personnel. Both parties pursued a similar aim, to civilize the African. A further factor which could have consolidated the ties between the European Church leaders and the secular colonial personnel was the challenge of Islam. By later 19th century, it was already a highly significant religion.

Colonial administration in Kenya was both centralized and authoritarian. The rulers manifested a sense of superiority over those they ruled and power was experienced as coming from above rather than flowing from below. Thus the ruled developed a sense of the state as an alien institution, to be feared but also to be deceived and exploited, since it existed on a plane above people whom it governed, beyond any chance of content. African responses took various religious forms; one was the persistence of traditional religious patterns. In the early years of the colonial system a growing number of Africans began to join the African Independent Churches because they were seen as more in tune with the African religious needs than the hierarchical European dominated Churches.

¹¹ Cherry Gertzel, *The Politics Of Independent Kenya 1963-68* (London:Heinemann,1970),p.1

¹² Jeff Haynes, *Religion and Politics in Africa* (Nairobi: EAEP/ZED Books, 1996), p.2

Christian missionary work in Kenya only began with colonial rule. Missionaries interacted with colonial governments from the onset.¹³ Nevertheless by 1920s and 1930s, there was a three-way relationship; at times conflictual, between missionaries, settlers and colonial churches and colonial authority over three issues; treatment of indigenous, land and education. From very early years the missions exerted great influence because they were pioneers in medical services, education and social welfare and economic development. Although they could at times be criticized for undue narrowness of view, they set standards which were vitally needed.¹⁴

The relations between government and members of the churches were often strained but frequently cordial. From 1920s prominent clergy, such as the Rev. Dr. Arthur of the Kikuyu Church of Scotland Mission (henceforth CSM), in 1920's and Archdeacon (Bishop and later the Archbishop) Beecher of the Church Missionary Society (Henceforth CMS) in the 1940's, had been nominated to represent the African interests on the Legislative and Executive councils.¹⁵

The missionaries tried to resist many things in colonial Kenya. They disagreed with the settlers particularly on issues which appeared oppressive to the Africans. In the Legislative Council (henceforth Leg Co) where they represented African interests they seemed to represent an opposition wing of the council.¹⁶ But despite this, they never ventured into such issues outside the Leg Co. Most clergy and church workers in colonial Kenya had a very restricted theology of power because their conservative tradition, with its belief in individual salvation and the strict authenticity of the Bible. This legacy

¹³ Spencer 1989: 116 – Spencer L. A. “Christian State in Colonial Africa: Influences Governing the Political Activity of Christian Missionaries in Kenya”, *Journal of Church and State*, Vol.XXXI no 1, p.115-32.

¹⁴ Richard Frost, *Race against Time: Human Relations and Politics in Kenya before Independence* (Nairobi: Transafrica, 1997), p.173.

¹⁵ Gideon Gichuhi Githiga, *the Church as the Bulwark against Authoritarianisms: Development of Church State Reference to the Years after Political Independence 1963-1992* (Nairobi: Ruaraka Printing Press, 2001), p.29.

¹⁶ Gideon Gichuhi Githiga, *The Church As The Bulwark Against Authoritarianisms: Development Of Church State Reference To The Years After Political Independence 1963-1992* (Nairobi:Ruaraka Printing Press, 2001), p. 28

dominated the church in the Kenyatta era and the first Moi era, when the church showed unlimited loyalty to the state.

When the church supports the government and assists in formulating governing policies it usually defends the state and those policies. If the government then appears to serve the interest of some and not all, then the church becomes one of the oppressors. In view of this many missionaries may be seen to have assisted the colonial government in furthering the British interests in the colony.¹⁷ In their efforts to implement colonial policies considered to liberate Kenyans from the barbarism of pre-colonial African life the missionaries participated in some of the oppression. Their gospel was hostile to much of the African cultural practices and favoured the western culture. As Welbourn asserts

The missionaries did not bring to Africa a ‘pure milk’ of the gospel but a complex culture which can be termed ‘Christian Western’. Missionaries are Europeans offering a culture which is Western as well as Christian, unable to escape, whether they wish it or not from identification with men of other professions of the same race”¹⁸

Like their colonial counterparts it has been established that the missionaries retained class boundaries and they segregated themselves from their converts and some of the missionaries discriminated against the African clergy. The missionaries, like their colonial counterparts, found it difficult to dislodge the paternal mantle of authority.¹⁹ The notion of the inferiority of African race was one of the reasons they were denied the opportunity of sitting in the Legislative Assembly with the Europeans. This alienated them from the policy-making institutions that discussed their affairs.

The Anglican Church was especially highly placed. First the majority of the settlers were members of the Anglican Church. During the First World War the CMS offered the

¹⁷ Gideon Gichuhi Githiga, *The Church As The Bulwark Against Authoritarianisms: Development Of Church State Reference To The Years After Political Independence 1963-1992* (Nairobi:Ruaraka Printing Press, 2001), p. 28

¹⁸ F. B. Welbourn, *East African Rebels* (London:OUP,1965),p.171

¹⁹ David Throup, “Render to Caesar the Things that are Caesars: The Conflict of Church and state In Kenya, 1978-1990” in Holger Bernt Hansen *et al*, (Eds) *Religion and Politics in Eastern Africa* (London: James Currey, 1995), p.144.

government unqualified use of its personnel and property as that principle that “it is our first duty to render to the government any assistance in our power even though it may interfere with our work.”²⁰ It is no wonder that the freedom agitators associated them with the colonial order that oppressed them. This however portrays the existence of a very close relationship between church and state. However, Lonsdale argues that the church was not barred from holding political opinions. In fact the majority of missionaries in positions of authority in the mission churches were hesitant raise issues that would have contradicted the government policy in the colony due to the cooperation that existed.²¹ But while the colonial church defended the state, a few individual missionaries made their stand obvious concerning the African liberation. The most notable were Archdeacon Walter Edwin Owen of Kavirondo in western Kenya and Archdeacon Leonard Beecher who represented Africans in the Leg Co.²²

Generally, the British missionaries did not take a confrontational stance against the colonial government because ‘there was in England at the time a very close relationship between church and state’.²³ Lonsdale observes that, the societies that were accorded an ‘established’ status by the state such as CMS and CSM were frequently called upon by the colonial government as consultants.

The Catholic missionaries were not necessarily British and refrained from any conflict with the colonial powers and indeed as by one Catholic historian who asserted, “But how was the church to better the lot of local population if not by entering into some form of understanding with the colonial power?”²⁴ But Catholics were acutely sensitive

²⁰ Robert W. Strayer, *the Making of Mission communities In East Africa: Anglicans and Africans in Colonial Kenya 1875- 1935* (London: Heinemann, 1972), p.100.

²¹ G.G.Githiga, *the Church as the Bulwark against Authoritarianisms: Development of Church State Reference to the Years after Political Independence 1963-1992* (Nairobi: Ruaraka Printing Press, 2001), p. 30.

²² G.G.Githiga, *The Church As The Bulwark Against Authoritarianisms: Development Of Church State Reference To The Years After Political Independence 1963-1992* (Nairobi: Ruaraka Printing Press, 2001), p. 30, J.M. Lonsdale, *Mission Christianity and Settler Colonialism* (ASAUUK: published Annual Conference Paper 19780”, p.25. George Bennet, “Imperial Paternalism: The Representations of African Interests in the Kenya Legislative Council” In F.Madden and K.Robinson, *Essays in Imperial government* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1963), p.161.

²³ J.M.Lonsdale, *Mission Christianity*, p.17.

²⁴ J.M. Lonsdale, *Mission Christianity*, p. 17

concerning their 'foreign' status and so were not anxious to press any particular political view.²⁵

In colonial times, main protestant bodies were politically quiescent. Both Anglican and Presbyterian (Church of Scotland Mission) churches developed a close semi establishment relations with the state long before independence. Perhaps this was possible because the church as well as the colonizers originated from the same place.²⁶

Their close identification with the colonial order and the consequent lack of nationalist legitimacy meant that the main-line churches including the Catholic Church became hesitant to be embroiled with the post independence state. Their chief fear was that the nationalists who had struggled were in power.

Towards the end of the colonial rule, Christian Mission Churches were regarded by some nationalists with great suspicions. The role of the Mainstream Religious organizations in the context of the drive for independence was both complex and multifaceted.

Mission churches were agents of European domination and superiority and this was equivocally recognized by the Africans as the key to advancement in colonial society. Mainstream Christianity was significant for the colonial government. It was tactfully employed in the pursuit of political domination.

On December 12th 1963 Kenya attained political independence with Jomo Kenyatta as the first head of state. The local elite took over the instruments of rule from the colonial powers. Kenya was a multiparty state soon after independence,²⁷ but Kenya became a republic and a *de facto* one party state in December 1964. The adoption of one party

²⁵ J.M. Lonsdale, *Mission Christianity*, p. 17

²⁶ John M. Lonsdale "Mission Christianity and settler colonialism in Eastern Africa" in Hansen and Twaddle. 195

²⁷ Jomo Kenyatta *Suffering Without Bitterness*, (Nairobi: EAPH, 1970), p.331

states in Africa were to face constant attacks from dissident and some church leaders who felt that absence of an opposition was the main cause of state authoritarianism.²⁸

At independence, many of the churches were themselves still controlled by foreign mission boards and missionaries. This means that they were themselves unprepared for the role which was thrust upon them as they became self governing. But whether the churches were supportive of the independence struggle for independence or not, it did not make much difference once independence was achieved because on the whole the post independent governments either wanted the full allegiance of the churches, or else they wanted them sidelined to purely spiritual activities. As most churches were pietistic in orientation they generally concurred, preferring church-state peace and patronage to conflict. They were often willing to be co-opted and as a result were unable to oppose the rise of dictatorships, clientelism and corruption in the post independent years.²⁹

Kenyatta had pleaded with the churches to continue to help and maintain their cooperation with government particularly their support in bringing lasting unity among the different ethnic Kenyan communities.³⁰ In spite of these seemingly imaginary fears in the Kenyatta era (1963 – 1970) the relations between the government and the churches remained relatively cordial. Like the mainline protestant churches, the Catholics felt well recognized. Church and State relations seemed to have been sealed during Kenyatta's installation as a political leader [Kenyatta].³¹ To Christians, the churches became the most active and persistent voice of the Kenyan political discourse.³²

Personal and ethnic activities, as David Throup points out, had implications for church capacity and relations with the state. Moreover, he emphasizes the fact that influential positions in government were held by church lay members. But the churches' power was not based on these connections alone, but the intensive social involvement throughout the

²⁸ Henry Okullu, *Church and Politics in East Africa* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1974), p 74-75.

²⁹ John W. DeGruchy, *Christianity and Democracy: A Theology for a Just World Order*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

³⁰ David Gitari, *In Season And Out Of Seasons: Sermons to a Nation* (Oxford: Regnum Books 1996), p. 13-21.

³¹ Githiga, p.147

³² Sabar Galia Sabar Friedman p. 377-378

country was by far the central foundation of the church's power.³³ The president's own relations held positions of power in two of the main line churches (Monsignor Muhoho [Catholic] and Obadiah Kariuki [CPK]). Moreover, by independence the NCCK had also developed cooperation with the nationalist movement. There were limits to this understanding between the churches and the state because some of the nationalist leader's position remained ambivalent.³⁴

The Church-state co-operation gained momentum when in 1964 Kenyatta called upon Kenyans and other residents irrespective of race, or origin, or religion to unite and build the country. For the church, this was a mere transfer of co-operation from colonial to independent Kenya. The two institutions had cooperated in their history in colonial Kenya.³⁵

Such co-operation between Church and State at Independence was evidenced by the Church's participation on December 12, 1963 at the Uhuru [Independence] celebrations. On this occasion, Kenyatta shared the dais with senior church leaders among them two Catholic bishops and two Anglican bishops.³⁶ Similarly politicians who formed Kenyatta's first parliament had been educated in the missionary schools and were also indebted to the Church. There was close interaction between the Church leaders and politicians. Lonsdale's observation affirms the scenario:

Cabinet Ministers and other dignitaries spent much of their public time in opening schools, local leaders' conferences, or urban welfare projects, with speeches that extol civic and Christian virtues. Such occasions for public exhortation are particularly important in Kenya where the political party has been allowed to wither away; the church and other voluntary associations have inevitably become

³³ David Throup "Render into Caesar the things that are Caesar's: The politics of Church State conflict in Kenya 1978-1990" in B. Hansen and M. Twaddle, *Religion and Politics in East Africa*".

³⁴ D. Throup, "Render into Caesar the things that are Caesar's: The politics of Church State conflict in Kenya 1978-1990" in B. Hansen and M. Twaddle, *Religion and Politics in East Africa*, p.145.

³⁵ G. Githiga, *The Church As A Bulwark*, p. 49

³⁶ See John Baur, *The Catholic Church in Kenya: a Centenary History* (Nairobi: St. Pauls Publication Africa, 1990.), p.221.

more instrumental to the government in its efforts to enlist popular participation in “nation building” campaigns against poverty, ignorance and disease.³⁷

Obviously then the church manifested a positive dimension of co-operation with the state. At the time of Independence Bishop Ndingi observed and condemned the ‘principle of subsidiarity’. He maintained that the Church and State needed to maintain complementary roles in developing the whole person. This was in compliance with the teaching of the gospel concerning the liberation of the human kind.³⁸

Whereas cooperation was significant at this time, the cooperation between the church and state has been historically known to be a hindrance to the prophetic mission of the church. The clergy who would address the social and political dimension of the gospel were gradually emerging and were beginning to vocalise their observations. Henry Okullu, the then editor of *Lengo* and *Target*, NCCCK magazines was the first to publicly protest over some issues. Okullu was later joined by Dr. David Gitari [later to become Bishop and Archbishop] from the CPK who became quite vocal in condemning the engagement of the state in political and social evils.³⁹

The argument here is that the leaders of the mainstream religious organizations after independence were strongly supportive of the government of the day. These supportive relations could have been due to three factors, first the shared class concerns on the part of both sets of leaders, religious and temporal. The second was the strong desire by religious leaders to maintain influence, as far as possible, with political elites. And finally there was the normative concern on the part of both sets of elites that political stability was a good thing in itself and so both had to maintain it. Thus pragmatism dominated state religious institution relations in Africa.⁴⁰

³⁷J.M.Lonsdale, “The Emerging Pattern”, p.171.

³⁸G. Githiga, *The Church As A Bulwark*, p. 51

³⁹Okullu, *Church and Politics* (Nairobi: Uzima Press 1971), p. 51.

⁴⁰Galia Sabar-Friedman, *the Church and the State in Kenya*.

In post-colonial Kenya the right to believe in a religion and the freedom to worship were guaranteed in the constitution. Hence from independence serious attempts were made to respect this fundamental right and freedom. And whereas the Kenyan state seemed to have no official religion, religion remained in the forefront of a number of state functions, for example state functions were normally conducted in accordance with the Christian rites. Religion potentially the Protestant version of Christianity was also given ample time even in state radios and televisions. As the late Bishop Henry Okullu said “In Africa today the state seems to be writing the agenda for both itself and for the church”. Towards the end of the 1980s, mainline church leaders emerged from the stupor and began to critique government activities quite adversely vocal on various issues to the chagrin of the state. Tensions persisted in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. The explosive nature of religious activities compelled the state to issue many public orders to curtail break down of law and order by religious groups.

In 1978, when Kenyatta died he was replaced by President Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi. In the Moi Era from 1978-2002 the situation did not dramatically change in the first years. The last part of this period he had become extremely authoritarian that he could not stand any opposition to him. It is at this time that the religious communities stiffly opposed certain misdeeds of the state. In Kenya during the 1980s, when all opposition political activity was banned, stiff opposition emanated from church-men: the Anglican Bishops Gitari, Muge and Okullu, and the Presbyterian Timothy Njoya. At the end of the decade the Catholic bishops began to play a similar role.

Given the severe limitations imposed on the intermediary structures between state and society, with the context of unlimited exercise of state power, the church took the “substitution” role.⁴¹ This role was legitimized by the church through its theology. The church indeed enjoyed tremendous power which was widely acknowledged, had a large constituency for which it was expected to speak, since it had the cohesive structure, a firm organization and a solidly unified institution. It was on the ground of this that its luminaries spoke with vigour (e.g. Henry Okullu and others). By mid 1980s, and in the

⁴¹ Galia Saber Fredman, *the Church and the State in Kenya*, p. 30.

absence of the effective alternative forums, only church leaders had the freedom and the power to criticize without detention. From early 1980s the right of the church to criticize the state was seriously challenged by the politicians. They acknowledged that the church and the state had emerged as two antagonistic powers and the government viewed the church as impinging on state prerogative.⁴² In the public debate which emerged in 1989s and early 1990s the government sought to establish a clear separation between the prophetic and the political mandating the church to be involved in the prophecies.

Although Church state controversy was not unknown during Kenyatta's era, the confrontations between the religious and secular leadership became more frequent under Moi's reign. Concerns were related to the fact that curtailment of civil rights and freedom of expression. As the Church strengthened its opposition outside parliament, so did the KANU politicians increase their attack on church leaders.⁴³ The concerns of the Church leaders were order and good governance. The call for change by church leaders and other dissidents was a consequence of people's lack of confidence in the government in power.⁴⁴

From 1986-1992 Kenya turned into an authoritarian state. The church emerged as defenders of the voiceless in society, at a time when other agitating groups like the Law Society of Kenya had succumbed to harassment. During this period, the church distanced itself from the KANU government. The state was engaged in the erosion of civil liberties, increasing human rights violations the stifling of all opposition and an unprecedented consolidation of power which the church leaders felt they could address without being thrown into prison.⁴⁵

Due to both local and international pressure in early December 1991 Moi initiated a special conference of KANU delegates, which resolved to permit the introduction of a multiparty political system. Soon afterwards the National Assembly approved appropriate

⁴² Shariff Nassir, as quoted in Finance, February 1990, p. 38

⁴³ *Daily Nation*, September, 30th 1988.

⁴⁴ The repeal of section 2(A) of the constitution that made Kenya a one party state by law.

⁴⁵ David Gitari, "Church and Politics in Kenya" in Transformation, July/September 1991 Vol.8 no3, p.15.

amendments to the constitution.⁴⁶ It was then announced that both the subsequent presidential and legislative elections would be in the context of multiparty by March 1993.⁴⁷

The outspoken church leaders became the real driving force towards change⁴⁸ and the church acted as the society's conscience. The Church in the 1990s confronted the State by mobilizing the citizenry against the authoritarianism. It created a situation that would lead to accountability of the state to the people the government would become accountable the people it represented. They did this through their sermons and pastoral letters. Inter-church and religious groups not only championed the cause of multiparty democracy, but were also intermediaries both between opposition political parties and governments.⁴⁹⁵⁰

The church's role in the multiparty era (through the NCCCK) was a major breakthrough in the history of the Christian Church in Kenya. First it forced a dialogue with the government through the media and through the KRC. Secondly it pressurized the government to repeal section 2A and return the country to a multiparty system and finally it launched a teaching programme to expose the citizenry to the demands of multiparty. And thirdly it educated the citizens about defending themselves against manipulation by those in power by fully participating in the democratization process.

Alternative Visions and the State: Indigenous Religious Groups.

Soon after the establishment of colonial rule African response seemed to assume different focus. Some collaborated, others turned to violence but then there was also the emergence of violent cults and religious independency. African churches arose between the World Wars as a reaction to situations characterized by severe instability and change following European conflict. They helped deal with the effects of cultural and political

⁴⁶ Walker, Kenya Recent History. 456.

⁴⁷ Walker, Kenya Recent History. 456

⁴⁸ Githiga, The church as the bulwark against authoritarianism, p.106.

⁴⁹ Githiga, The church as the bulwark, p. 111.

⁵⁰ Towards Multiparty Democracy in Kenya (Nairobi:NCCCK,1992), ,p.17.

subjugation during colonial period. At the end of colonial rule they did not die off and they have survived to date for apparently different reasons.

Such movements were the manifestation of popular religious movements with a number of interrelated religious, social and political goals. The emergence of such religions was often explained in terms of the unique pressures and transformations associated with colonisation.⁵¹

Their emergence in colonial times was seen as contrasting with and in opposition to colonial religious institutions whether those of mission churches or of reified traditional religion. Hence nearly all religious movements whether witchcraft eradication movements or millenarian sects, have been treated as explicable in terms of special pressures and transformations of colonialism. One such movements was Dini ya Msambwa(henceforth DyaM). It could have risen because of number of reasons such as the context of colonial oppression or as a response to cultural and psychological tensions and not expressions of political antagonism.⁵² Buijtenhujis challenged and disputed Audrey Wipper's (1977) interpretation of the DyaM movement in western Kenya. Predictably, he found that DyaM "Is not a political protest movement but a social and cultural protest movement".⁵³

These attempts to portray African religious movements as either purer than inferior to political activity are no more convincing, however, than previous notions that they were essentially part of the sequence of anti-colonial nationalism. Few can study these movements without feeling that even if they were not unequivocally anti colonial they constituted a form of politics; without sensing rationality in their irrationality; without being struck by the instrumentality of their symbols. DyaM was a good example of these African indigenous responses colonial situation.

⁵¹ T.O. Ranger," Religious Movements and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Africa Studies Review* Vol. XXXIX No. 2, p.1-70, p.2.

⁵² T.O. Ranger "Religious movements and politics in sub-Sharan Africa", *Africa Studies Review* Vol. 29 No. 2 1986 p.2.

⁵³ T.O. Ranger, "Religious Movements and Politics In Sub Saharan Africa" *Africa Studies Review*, Vol 29, Number 2, June 1986, p. 3

Basically, DYM was fighting for space or recognition within the colonial system which would neither listen nor provide the space. The founder had grievances which seemed fair. Elijah was a defiant and impatient person and ignored threats from the church and did not obey orders from the Native Tribunal Court which he served from 1937-1942. He was clear that for his people to be accommodated within the colonial space they needed a religion firmly rooted in their traditions and way of life, a religion that would be comprehensible and meaningful as well as sympathetic to the peoples social code. Christianity was not a place to feel at home, they needed a religion which could blend African traditions and the more wholesome parts of Christianity.

DyaM attracted a large following which considered it “our own religion” as distinct from the established churches.⁵⁴ Despite descriptions from a hostile colonial system, his members regarded him as messiah, and his religion as the rightful and true religion. For example, they declared “Europeans have long troubled us; we have now got our own God. Let us go forward...”⁵⁵ As the leader of the sect Elijah fought for space. He was able to exploit the grievances of the people, and champion their cause, win their support. Despite government measures to stamp it out by making itself intolerable to the members, they continued with their activities by night on Mt. Elgon. They threatened the administration with death and sent all sorts of letters to them. Throughout the attitude was defiant and arrogant. Again throughout this period for DYaM politics and religion were intermixed. The state used state violence to respond. But despite efforts to guzzle the movement it spread further a field.⁵⁶ Moreover, it survived into independent Kenya.

Obviously then emergence of organized protest movements among Kenyan communities came mainly as a result of growing discontent against the policies of the missions and the colonial administration. The minority independent Christian Churches /culture movements were automatically rendered strange bedfellows with the state, the moment they delinked from the Mission bodies and made their own concoctions. Evidently

⁵⁴ Were *Religion and Nationalism*, 1972, p.88

⁵⁵ Were, *Religion and Nationalism*, 1972, p.89

⁵⁶ Were, *Religion and Nationalism*, 1972, p. 99

Christianity was largely associated with European colonial domination of large numbers of Africans. Many left to join the burgeoning African Independent Churches and cults.

At the declaration of the state of emergency in 1952, the independent churches and other suspect religious practices suffered a blow. Some operated underground whereas others were totally banned and survived from operation and only in name. DYaM was banned but its operations went underground. Independence was the occasion for its re-emergence in public. The post independent government, however, endorsed the re-emergence of all religious groups although DYaM ignored Kenyatta's call for its immediate registration.

The re-emergence of DYM in the post colonial period, witnessed the release of Masinde and some of his followers from detention. When Masinde was released from prison in 1961, after 13 years in detention, he was given a hero's welcome and indication of the special place Masinde held in the hearts of the people.⁵⁷

On 12th April 1964, Jomo Kenyatta revoked the colonial order that had declared DYM an illegal society. Those imprisoned nevertheless had to complete their sentences. The new government told DYM to register like any other religious organization in order to resume its activities and obtain official recognition. The alternative was to disband and refrain from secret activities. Despite the fact that it was not registered, DYM continued to hold meetings and the government arrests persisted because its meetings were regarded as illegal.

In May 1964, DYM was registered and one of its objectives was to abide by the law of the land and to be non political. But its constitution remained a mere piece of paper, for soon after, Masinde got embroiled in the cross currents of Kenyan politics. Rumours were rife indicating that Elijah would head a new party, since he was quite categorical that he would not join any of the existing parties which were disunited. He said "I want to

⁵⁷ Wipper, *Rural Rebels* 1977, p. 269.

tell the political leaders to unite on every major national issue. I shall ask them why they are in so much dispute, delaying the country's independence.⁵⁸

He later gave support to KANU in an area predominated by Kenya African Democratic Union (henceforth KADU) and referred to Kenyatta as "my greatest friend" at a KANU rally in Kitale. He even stated that God had revealed secrets to him during his sleep. The Kitale politicians did not take this well.⁵⁹ His own community was angered by him on this matter. Moreover his followers began to engage in a number of disruptive activities. They invaded missionary centres and ordered them to leave. Most of such incidents occurred during the 1964-65 Congo crisis. One of them occasioned the rush of police reinforcements to Kimilili because it was feared that DYM members could easily resort to violence against the American missionaries in the vicinity.

The community was also adversely affected by the DYM activities. The overnight ceremonies particularly night drumming was a major disturbance and he was warned by the local chief. He led his followers in sacrifices and condemned those who had purchased land in Maitri hill declaring that DYM followers would snatch the lands for free. He even castigated several policemen for spying on their meetings and caned two members arrived at the venue of the meeting in a police car. Meanwhile the Africans who owned land, reported to the powers that be, their fears of DYM's activities with regard to land.⁶⁰

In the first years of independence, DYM's major project was the construction of their own schools because their adherents could not raise fees to take their children to government and mission schools. Despite lack of facilities and teachers, they proceeded with the construction of schools and some parents withdrew their children from government schools and enrolled them in DYM schools which provided free education. The District Education Officer repeatedly warned Masinde to either register his schools or close them down to no avail. Perhaps years of opposition to colonial government had

⁵⁸ *East African Standard*, 3rd January 1962

⁵⁹ *East African Standard*, 13 May 1962

⁶⁰ Wipper, *Rural Rebels* 1977, p. 271.

taken their toll on Msambwa's amenability to any government authority. The government was not ready to take what it considered disobedience subsequently the government charged DYM for starting illegal schools. Their case was heard in Bungoma in November 1965 and those responsible were fined and released.

Masinde was becoming a jail bird with numerous charges against him. On 23rd September 1968 Masinde was again imprisoned for taking the law into his own hands when he beat up Grace Nasimiyu for philandering and forcefully took her back to her former husband, and ordered her to defrock before them for cleansing ceremony. She reported to police and both Masinde and her husband were arrested and given terms of two years and one year in prison respective.⁶¹

Masinde's confrontations with the authorities took on a characteristic pattern, his confrontations were in public places, they were showy events and yet such confrontations were significant for each party concerned as a test of their power. Masinde's predilection for confrontations with the authorities was also reciprocated by the powers that be. The police had had enough of Masinde's disturbances and were on the alert for any excuse to keep him in jail. He was severally arrested on charges of "conduct likely to cause a breach of peace, incitement to defiance of lawful authority, obstructing police officer in carrying out his duty, resisting arrest, being a member of unlawful society and holding unlawful meetings. In 1960s and 1970s he had so many cases that some ran concurrently. For Masinde and his followers, the police was their enemy number one.

Masinde complained against police harassment and often for his redetention to save him from police threats. But the persistence of Masinde's revolutionary activities in post colonial times caused concern. He was an individual condemned and ridiculed, viewed as an agitator and not a nationalist. Some went to the extent of requesting his detention. Masinde's erratic moods and eccentricities were no longer admitted, in fact, the opinion grew that he was demented. His followers also continually reduced in numbers.⁶² They

⁶¹ Wipper, *Rural Rebels* 1977, p. 273.

⁶² Wipper, *Rural Rebels* 1977, p.279

were tired of paying the fines. Masinde further compounded his diminishing numbers of followers by denouncing Kenyatta's government as one of usurpers and predicted that Kenyatta would be short. In December 1966, the Attorney General Charles Njonjo regretted that the government had released Masinde because it was premature. Njonjo declared DYaM a bogus religion and used as a tool to earn some income by Masinde. Consequently, the government continued to keep DYaM under surveillance.⁶³ In 1968 the Vice President warned that DYaM would be banned if it persisted in holding political ideologies and destructive tendencies to disunite the people of North Nyanza⁶⁴. Finally in October 1968, the Attorney General Charles Njonjo proscribed DYaM as a "society dangerous to the good government of Kenya" because it preached sedition and revolt and not the word of God.⁶⁵

The loyal members were persuaded that Masinde was an innocent victim of the police and government harassment and were appalled that an African government not only arrested him but treated him like any ordinary law breaker. For his followers, Masinde was undergoing persecution and disappointment and bitterness gave rise to a myth, that Kenyatta's government was doomed because of the maltreatment of Masinde. They prophesied that a new prophet would emerge overthrow Kenyatta and Masinde would rule and his former persecutors would seek his forgiveness and pardon.⁶⁶

In 1975, while Masinde was serving a jail term, the movement, as far as could be ascertained, became inactive. This did not mark the demise of the movement because soon after his release he was again popping comments on all issues even political leadership. Several times the courts referred him to Mathari Mental Hospital to ascertain his sanity but the moment he was discharged he would consistently comment on the political order of the day. He led his group in agitation even at the time when detention without trial was legal and even president Moi was uncomfortable with him. But in 1987

⁶³ *East African Standard*, 1st Dec. 1966

⁶⁴ *East African Standard*, 1st Dec. 1966

⁶⁵ *East African Standard*, 25 October 1968

⁶⁶ Wipper, *Rural Rebels* 1977, p.286

he died as Kenyans were hounded by political intolerance. His movement survives and may not necessarily be politically active.

It is obvious that despite the coexistence of the minority religious groups and the state, they had numerous grievances, thwarted hopes, state manipulation that caused them to voice their marginality. The pressure of the minority religious groups during the Moi era seemed to be minimal, possibly because most of them lacked the capacity to handle trouble at this level. Most of them were also engaged in internal wrangling, that they frequently called for state intervention. Those that wrangled lost their credibility as forces to reckon with. The engagement of the minority religious groups in politics may not be significant, because for many of them politics was never an issue because their concerns related to their maintenance and retention of their religious traditions. They would rise against government if it interfered with their religious traditions. They would respond violently.

In the late eighties and early 1990s many religious groups which were difficult to categorize began to emerge. They seemed to have an unclear agenda but which had political overtones. An example of these was Mungiki, a supposed religious movement clothed with diverse aspirations ranging from political to religio-cultural and socio-economic liberation. One of the dramatic aspects of the *Mungiki* was its prophetic and vocal fight for the political liberation of Kenyans through a return to indigenous shrines.

Mungiki was a religio-political movement composed mainly of large masses of Gikuyu origin was estimated in 1990s, by its national coordinator, to have about one and a half million members, including 400,000 women. This number remained questionable, but their members were distributed around Nairobi, particularly within the slums, and scattered in Central and Rift Valley Provinces.

Its membership comprised mostly the victims of land clashes on the eve of the 1992 multiparty general elections in Kenya. The group strongly resented exploitation and the accumulation of massive wealth by a small proportion of Kenyans, especially in top

political ranks and at the expense of the masses. Mungiki followers demonstrated their goodwill by sharing resources among themselves.⁶⁷

Since the group comprised the less advantaged in society they equated the term Mungiki with oppression, exploitation, and alienation of the masses. Initially the aim of Mungiki was to sensitise people against the government which they accused of starting and fuelling the 1992 clashes. It started administering oaths of unity to its members to effectively retaliate against the violence. The movement immediately alarmed the government to the extent that to date its individual members and its assemblies have been victimised by the police.⁶⁸

Mungiki members were initially part of the Tent of the Living God – a sect founded by Ngonywa wa Gakonya in 1987, with a large following in Central, Nairobi and Rift Valley Provinces. Ngonywa nurtured the idea of Tent movement from as early as 1960. He started sensitizing people about African religious beliefs to the elders chagrin and joined the Akorino sect briefly in 1980s, before breaking away. Thereafter, he engaged in rigorous public campaigns, which were banned in 1990 after a mass rally held at the Kamukunji grounds in Nairobi. Consequently, Ngonywa was arrested and imprisoned for two years. His release, through a presidential amnesty, coincided with the clamour for political pluralism in Kenya. Leaders of the Tent decided to form a political party, which they argued, would play a role as the forerunner to a religious culmination. The Democratic Movement (DEMO), a political party, was born, with Ngonywa as its interim leader but was denied registration because of its religious background⁶⁹ or, as its leaders argue, it was blocked by the ruling party KANU from participation in the 1992 parliamentary elections, for fear it might win. Ngonywa later collaborated with KANU, a move which caused some of his followers to denounce him as evidence that he lacked principles.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Grace Wamue, “Revisiting our indigenous shrines through Mungiki” *African Affairs*’s 2001 Vol. 100 p. 453

⁶⁸ Grace Wamue, “Revisiting our indigenous shrines through Mungiki” *African Affairs*’s 2001 Vol. 100 p. 453

⁶⁹ Kenya defines itself as a secular state and insists on the separation between religion and the state. The establishment of political parties based on religion

⁷⁰ Ibid

Mungiki was a splinter group more vibrant than the Tent of the Living God. It maintained secrecy due to fear of being hounded and subsequently detained. However, the group benefited from freedom of worship, expression and association with the advent of multiparty politics in 1992.

The main objective of the Mungiki, was to unite and mobilize the Kenyan masses and to fight against the yoke of mental slavery. Although initially exclusively a Gikuyu affair, the group expected to embrace all other Kenyans through similar but autonomous movements that would revive the heritage of other African peoples.⁷¹ Mungiki had four aims: to unite the Gikuyu people, and consequently, other Kenyans; to redeem the Gikuyu from Western culture brought about by Christianity and colonialism; to liberate the Kenyan masses from political oppression and economic exploitation; and to restore Africans to their indigenous values, culture and religion.

The notions of the denunciation and repudiation of foreign worship, specifically Christianity, and the reversion to indigenous shrines caused much controversy, and misunderstanding resulting in a chorus of condemnation of the Mungiki movement by many Kenyans. The church and the state, in particular, were quite vocal in condemning this belief. Given that the sect seemed to propagate a subversive doctrine and agenda the Church needed to reject and combat it decisively, in particular its demonstrations. Its action amounted to a clear onslaught against the established churches. Further, it seemed a fundamentalist movement with a religious, political and cultural agenda: its slogans were heretical and its philosophy of isolation was a dangerous move to alienate the Gikuyu community and set it on a collision course with the government and other communities.⁷² Its followers denounced ferociously the Christian faith with all its beliefs and practices due to their irrelevance. Christianity and its appendage, the Bible created mental slavery and mental colonization from which the Gikuyu and all other Kenyans

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 459-460

⁷² Ibid. p. 460

had to rid themselves off. Since God would not support corruption, corrupt Christians were not genuine worshipers of God.⁷³

Mungiki emphasized the political polarity in Kenya during Moi's reign was a consequence of abandoning African culture and religion. They criticised Moi's political system for its persistent oppression, amassing of wealth through seasoned corruption, grabbing public land, bribery, and economic exploitation of the masses.

Mungiki associated every problem ailing Kenya with Moi. However they were also aware that Europeans had also strategically planned and created economic hardships that plagued Kenya throughout time. Neo-colonialism escalated the economic hardships. Given that Western religion was also used to oppress Africans, Mungiki would in turn use its religion to mobilize and fight for African rights and identity. They vehemently rejected the accusation that they were regressive. Mungiki proposed an indigenous religio-political revolution. Members operated like terror gangs. They raided police stations, engaged in bloody battles over control of local public transport and repulsed police raids.⁷⁴ As a result, the authorities always described it as illegal organization and disrupted all its meetings.

The local press reported Mungiki's clashes with the authorities. Church leaders and government officials continuously and vehemently condemned the movement. The KANU government was so anxious about the sect that, and severally the Member of Parliament for Molo, Kihika Kimani, paraded groups of dreadlocked youths at presidential rallies in Nakuru town, introducing them as repentant Mungiki followers who were swiftly denounced by the Mungiki leadership as impostors used to gain political advantage. According to the sect's followers, conversion to Mungiki was irreversible.

The sect has, however, clearly acquired impetus from several political events. A case in point occurred on 12th December 1998. Waruinge organized his own congress at

⁷³ Ibid. p. 462

⁷⁴ *Daily Nation* March 13 Wednesday 2002

Mukurweini-wa-Gathanga the mythical home of origin for the Gikuyu people, 17 kilometres from Murang'a town since it is situated on government land, gazetted as a National Monument on 19 November 1998, it was controlled by the state. Chanting Mau Mau war songs and reciting traditional prayers, the sect hoisted their flag with the stern warning that they would not tolerate further disruption of their religious activities by the government.

The Murang'a County Council, under whose jurisdiction the shrine fell, immediately declared it out of bounds for the Mungiki. The Mungiki invoked their constitutional right to hold prayers at the Heritage site at any time, even during the public celebrations. They based this claim on the constitution which allowed freedom of worship, and which did not stipulate time and venue. The only non-Gikuyu epithet read *Muungano wa Ukombozi*, the Kiswahili words for 'liberation movement'.

Members constantly expressed concern for the politics of contemporary Kenya and bitterly lamented KANU's machinations that split the original Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD) party which would have removed KANU from power. They criticized the widespread political oppression, poverty and violence experienced by Kenyans at the hands of government agents in the same breath as they condemned cultural and religious imperialism. (OI: Scattered members).

Their protests were sometimes very violent, for instance, on Sunday 3 March 2002, 200 and 300 Mungiki adherents terrorized the residents in a section of Nairobi's Kariobangi North estate rampaging through the busy streets and alleyways, armed with an assortment of *panga*, swords, iron bars and knives, violently assaulting local residents and passers-by. The carriage was gruesome. By morning, 20 residents were confirmed dead, and a further 31 had been admitted to hospital with serious injuries.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ *Daily Nation*, Friday, March 8, 2002.

The attitude of the police and government to their activities at this time raised a number of questions. These questions became all sharper following the attack, when it was revealed that Kasarani MP, Adolf Muchiri, had reported his fears about the tension in Kariobangi two weeks prior to the massacre. The police and office of the president was aware because the information had been appropriately given them. On the very day of the attack, Muchiri on three occasions contacted the police to inform them of the imminent violence by Mungiki was likely in Kariobangi.

Public concern over police failure to take adequate steps to prevent the violence was deepened by the reports of police heavy-headedness, insensitivity and general incompetence in rounding-up supposed 'suspects' upon their arrival in Kariobangi some hours following the attack. It was almost evident that the State could not guarantee the full application of the law. Granted, the law promised a lot, but no one was arrested in connection with the killings and to date that is a silent chapter in Kenya's history. It was also evident that the state kept altering its stance against Mungiki. Failure of the police to do their primary job of dealing with crime and preventing breakdown of law and order was evident in this incident.

The rising tension gave birth to injury and death due to the absence of civil order and lack of a symbol of authority they could trust to arbitrate their conflicts and punish wrongdoing as well as an authoritative deterrent to the expression of their violent emotions. Evidently there was a vacuum in the reassurance of law and order in their lives, for all weekend, the Government was comatose. But possibly the ambivalent behaviour could have been due to the states change of stance regarding Mungiki.

Mungiki members like others lacked employment and resorted to supplying the political thuggery and violence; they re-engineered themselves into security managers parallel to the police. They arrogated to themselves police powers and duties. They actually succeeded in creating an image of efficiency which the police lacked. They manned "matatu" terminus, patrolled estates and arbitrated in disputes.

Underlying these fears was the suspicion that the slaughter had been politically motivated. There was widespread speculation, reported in all Kenyan newspapers, that Mungiki members were in fact protected by senior politicians, that the violence had been orchestrated for political ends, and that Mungiki even had recruits within the ranks of the police force. This conclusion was reached because before 2002 police had been violently breaking up Mungiki meetings, but in 2002 it had been allowed to hold rallies in Nairobi, Thika and Nyandarua. Some KANU officials even participated in these meetings and donated money.⁷⁶ Many analysts saw the Kariobangi attack as symptomatic of Kenya's growing culture of political violence, making connections with other incidents of vigilantism elsewhere in the country and with previous cases of politically mobilized inter-ethnic violence surrounding the elections campaigns of 1992 and 1997.

From its inception in the early 1990's, Mungiki was one of Kenya's most controversial religious sects, demonised by all and sundry. Mainstream Church leaders, the authorities, and President Moi described it as "illegal, Satanic and violent", viewing it as a sinister, anti-Government movement motivated by tribal atavism. On the other hand, it was supported to the hilt by a few Members of Parliament from Kikuyu-dominated areas in Central Province, parts of Rift Valley and Nairobi. Thus, to many Kenyans, the sect was a Kikuyu movement with a hidden political agenda.

Mungiki had many lives and in intense moments disappeared and re-emerged with new force for instance in August 2001 everyone, was taken aback by the new-look Mungiki Sect during one of its meetings. The speakers sounded transformed and the members were unusually law-abiding, peaceful and conciliatory in their political utterances. They exuded confidence and pride as they trooped, cycled and rode to the industrial town's Starehe grounds, while local traders took no chances and closed shop in case there was a violent confrontation between the visitors and police.⁷⁷ At the Thika meeting just before the 2002 general elections they also seemed well organized, the venue properly arranged and sufficiently decorated. At the climax of the meeting Mr Waruinge announced that the

⁷⁶ *Daily Nation*, March 13, 2002

⁷⁷ *The Nation*, August 10, 2001

sect would be transformed into a political movement - not a party - targeting 150 of the 210 constituencies through the various parties. He was clear about its financial ability, and the qualities they expected an aspiring presidential candidate. This time the police allowed the sect to hold what the co-ordinator described as an "annual delegates' meeting" to chart out its future stand in the socio-political landscape. To observers, the sudden Government turn around to allow Mungiki to hold a meeting, especially one with such a strong political agenda, was unusual.

The Moi era had paradoxes for Mungiki the beginning was hectic but later there was change as they related well with the state obtaining much encouragement. They engaged in public demonstrations with state approval. Moi at this time was described as a wise and understanding person, a visionary leader and with the conception of the value of morality. Due to the fine relations, Mungiki experienced phenomenal growth and got a lot of moral and financial support from KANU politicians. It is possible that Moi's regime tolerated Mungiki for political gain.

As at 2002 Mungiki leader engaged in critiquing politicians the Moi government was apprehensive about. They criticised Mwai Kibaki, then official leader of the opposition in the then Parliament, and the Kikuyu-based Gikuyu, Embu and Meru association (GEMA). Mungiki seemed to have been financed to erode the influence of Mr Kibaki's Democratic Party in Central Province. Their appreciation of Moi seemed unbelievable given their past relationship. President Moi for his decision ready to step down in 2002 elections in favour of a young contender. To many observers, Waruinge's move was reminiscent of Mr Ngonywa wa Gakonya's Tent of the Living God sect, which was very vocal against the government before the first multi-party elections in 1992, but which faded away as soon as KANU romped home. So as the clock ticked closer to 2002 General Election, It was interesting to note where this born-again movement was headed.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ *The Nation*, August 6, 2001

Inferences could be made concerning this rally, first, that the Mungiki rally was sanctioned by KANU and second, that Mungiki was emerging from the tribal garb to entertain the yearning for national unity. Ironically, they affirmed that they would be decisive in this action and not merely watch the country recede to the “dogs”.

Due to its activities during the pre-election fever, Mungiki was initially not accepted soon after Moi left power however, it garnered support from strange quarters. In 2003 the US State Department in its 2003 Annual report on International Religious Freedom criticised the Kenya Government of "harassing" the Mungiki sect⁷⁹. Kenya was accused of "frequently harassing and periodically arresting and detaining" members of Mungiki. Perhaps the State Department's critique may have been misplaced because obviously the report did not take cognizance of the many violent incidents the sect had been implicated in.

The State Department's assessment of religious freedom, especially regarding the handling of Mungiki, seemed be weird but it had a precedent in Kenya itself. This opinion was also expressed four months after the Government banned the sect along with 17 other organisations in March 2002⁸⁰ by the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCK), when it released a report in praise of some of Mungiki practices and beliefs as "progressive". The report hailed the sect for preaching self-reliance, hard work and independence. NCCK report was amazing because the oldest umbrella body for Kenyan Protestants, considered female genital mutilation and tobacco-sniffing as the sect's only "retrogressive practices". This countered the individual churches opinion about Mungiki.

Mungiki's presence as religious groups in Kenya would be considered a sign of the religions muddle for while religion might have played a role in its formation observers believed that it was no longer a key characteristic of the group. It claimed to espouse a return to Kikuyu traditional religion and cultural practices. But as at 2003, its members were freed to join any religion and indeed its own national co-ordinator Ndura Waruinge

⁷⁹ Francis Ayieko, *The East African*, Monday December 29, 2003.

⁸⁰ NCCK report "Mungiki Movement in Kenya: Religion Political Analysis 2002". After Mungiki members were implicated in the massacre of 28 people in Nairobi's Kariobangi Estate.

converted to Christianity in 2003. This was also evidenced earlier in 2002 when they tried to woo Muslims to become their allies. It failed. Mungiki's initial religious mission espousing the Kikuyu culture seemed to wane.

At the inception of the Kibaki government at the start of 2003 Mungiki had become on its own preoccupied with arrogance and self assumed importance that it began issuing numerous threats. The security officers responded to this severely with the blessings of the government until Mungiki followers had to change identity. In the year 2004 there was a resurgence of its activities and the government remained mum raising numerous suspicions concerning its relations with the majority of the politicians of the Kikuyu ethnicity. Mungiki retreated into a level of secrecy that seeking information from and about them became an extensively risky affair. This remains the position to date and available evidence indicates that in any agitation the government might find it a viable tool to cause fear and acrimony.

In the Kibaki era, Mungiki adherents experienced total harassment, intimidation, persecutions, arrests and systematic extermination of the group and a "demonization of the religious movement". The government even encouraged Mungiki members to defect to other religions. The minister for internal security vowed in 2003 to completely destroy Mungiki and these immensely annoyed members who went underground. However in the same year the state's ambivalence regarding Mungiki was noteworthy. It began to be used as a tool to terrorise and subjugate other Kenyans. Indeed its Mungiki forces that were used by President Kibaki and his cronies to fight in the towns of the Rift Valley and Nairobi on behalf of the Kikuyu ethnicity during the post election violence in Kenya in the recent past. In 2008 after the post election violence Mungiki made a number of standoffs to which the state machinery failed to respond leaving the population wondering and speculating.

The evident ambivalence with regard to Mungiki in both the Moi and Kibaki governments occurred only before they knew how to utilise Mungiki. At this moment

they meted violence on Mungiki but the moment they discovered that Mungiki could also be manipulated and controlled, they withdrew into their cocoons.

Conclusively this religio-political movement adopted Gikuyu religion as a weapon to challenge political and religious authority. In Mungiki, religion became a tool to mobilize the masses for active resistance and to claim liberation and justice, as demonstrated by its condemnation of ethnicity, tribalism, nepotism, oppression, bribery, corruption, idleness, immorality, drug abuse, crime, and so on. However, despite their efforts to condemn ethnicity and tribalism, by establishing a purely Gikuyu sect in terms of culture, beliefs, and practices, they were promoting the same vices they opposed and alienated many Kenyans.

Mungiki operated on the shoulders of the Radical Restoration—“Tent of the Living God”, which emerged in 1987. According to the informants the leader was the radical Ngonywa wa Gakonya, then the 52-year-old leader of a “back-to-the-golden-Kikuyu-culture” movement known as the “Tent (dwelling) of the Living God” and advocate of “Africanity” (his word). Ngonywa wa Gakonya was an outspoken advocate of traditional African ways of worship. He had interesting observations:

African religion is perhaps the oldest in the history of mankind. But the [conventional] Church has ignored its existence and its values. We have come to demand the return to our culture through our churches. Most people do not understand religion. The greatest religion is in the homestead that is why when there is a crisis, we go back to our homesteads.

Basic tenets of the movement were straightforward and, according to Ngonywa, “similar to the beliefs of the Zulu and other African communities across the continent.” Myths of Kikuyu origin focused on Mt. Kenya, toward which all worshipers of Ngai (God) turned their faces when in formal prayer. “Ngai, the creator God, gave birth to the human community and provided all the resources necessary for life. It was wrong to ask or beg of God for sustenance. Ngai’s abundance was already with men. Human beings had to

use these resources and fulfil their obligations by procreating and nurturing their offspring's in an orderly manner.”

Adherents of the faith had been widely exposed to, or, according to them, variously “destroyed” by Christianity. Indeed, Ngonyo himself was raised in a family with membership in the Presbyterian Church. Due to a series of disappointments, among which was his father's refusal to organise for his timely circumcision, he became intensely interested in the Kikuyu tradition. This interest was further piqued when he missed a scholarship which he felt was rightly his due. Beginning in 1974, he left his formal sector job and engaged in the profitable business of selling herbal medicines. In the 1980s, he was exposed to traditional ritual gatherings, eventually meeting with Kikuyu elders under the rubric: “The Tent of the Living God.” However, such people seemed closely tied to aspects of the biblical Old Testament and were poorly informed about traditional Kikuyu beliefs. He chose to attain great understanding of traditional faith with his family as the focus and it was only later that it became possible, eventually, to address public audiences.

Despite the fact that he was hounded, during the early 1990s by church leaders and the international community as an “anti-Christ,” he was able, by 1997, to “ordain” 18 candidates into a form of “elder hood.” Meanwhile, his relationship with traditional practitioners extended beyond the Kikuyu to include the Meru and Embu, with whom they had spiritual and cultural affinity. He did not perceive himself as an ordinary elder, though he ordained and related with other elders and a “Council of Elders.” He understood that this council was neither recognized by the Kikuyu people generally, nor by the Kenya government, as an authoritative Kikuyu voice. Ngonyo perceived himself as a visionary, a spiritual leader (he allowed the term “evangelist”), in the tradition of his grandfather, identifying the sickness of modern Kenyan society and pointing toward a restoration of the tradition as a source of well being.

Ngonya affirmed the following value and faith elements,⁸¹ three essential foods—*nyama* (meat), *asali* (honey), *maziwa* (milk); three essential values—*amani* (peace), *upendo* (love), *umoja* (unity); three essential colors—*red* (blood), *black* (people), *green* (land-vegetation).⁸² The Tent of the Living God sustained a strong sense of a return to the origins of Kikuyu culture and identity. In the context of this research, the Tent of the Living God community serves as a purist, but so far a marginalized, reconstruction of the traditional Kikuyu community. However truncated, it must be recognized as one of the current expressions of Kikuyu religio-cultural tradition, perhaps one end of a broad continuum giving voice and shape to an idealized version of the world of the elders and *Ngai*, the *Mwathani* (the greatest ruler).⁸³

Concerning the Mungiki sect, he stated that the members were initially his followers, but strayed when they began to advocate for women's forceful circumcision, and offering of sacrifices in ways not prescribed by Kikuyu tradition. Ngonya freely acknowledged that his movement appealed to low income people of Kenya. He recognized that his group would not exercise any influence on the government of Kenya and on the body politic. He was unable to register a political party known as DEMO and ended up establishing the Cultural Trust of Kenya, which he claimed was registered, despite the lack of the evidence of an official certificate. This trust enabled him to seek monetary contributions from Kenyans and other donor agencies.

Later Ngonya joined KANU and this caused his followers to feel betrayed that they sought to eliminate him and he fled for his life. Ngonya was later to warm his way back into association with Ford Asili one of the political parties. Ngonya swore by God that he never defected to KANU in spite of television footage where he was welcomed on various occasions to the presidential dais by the president Moi himself. He did not have his traditional regalia on but was clad in a Kaunda suit.

⁸¹ Gleaned from some of his followers during the introductory proceedings of the outdoor service and from the subsequent "sermon".

⁸² These cultures were captured in the Kenyan National Flag.

⁸³ OI, Ngonya 27 March 04

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These indigenous religious groups did not differ from other religious groups that emerged in violence but after a while necessarily manipulated by state functionaries. Their violence and the human rights violations could be committed by both sides but somehow after a while interests would begin to converge and the religious violence would no longer be violently responded to by the state. This would mean that they would be tethered and made useful tools by the state.

Conclusion

The relationship between the government and these religious movements has been ambivalent. Sometimes the state embarks on the policy of total harassment, systematic extermination of the group and been “demonization of the religious movement”. They even encouraged members to defect to other religions. This raises the questions related to democracy, human rights and citizenship. These are key factors that become very challenging because the members of these movements may not understand the meanings.

Democracy implies the acceptance of religious pluralism and tolerance at the very least, but it also requires that people of different faiths learn to cooperate in bringing about the just democratic transformation of society. The way forward is invariably not as much as the level of etiological debate, but in practical cooperation particularly in the area of human rights advocacy.

Whether conscious or unconscious the state has marginalised the minority religious groups and from evidence it is clear that the minorities desire the government action on marginalisation. Participation and marginalization are matters that relate to power and access and therefore it was significant to know about the accessibility of certain services to the minority religious members. Kenyan nation-state needs to rethink its position on these religions. Possibly the initiation of true dialogue would sort out many relational issues. Conscious opening of the space would be very important. This can only be done through the realisation of plural space and provide equal chance for player with clear rules and instruction. Freedom of association must be recognised and implemented as the

minorities also realise the significance of the human rights of other Kenyans who are not their adherents. The creation of a free and conducive environment for participation and provision of civic education for all would ensure that they were aware of what was going on in the land and gain power to participate without fear.

The conclusions of this paper are as follows one that

- Kenya portrays a homogenous disposition of nation state narration. However, in reality, there is heterogeneity with some people being excluded from the nation state narration. Most members of the minority religious identities, for example, operate on the margins of that narration.
- Some minority religious identities are occasionally accommodated in the nation-state narration to counter the views raised by majority religious identities on matters of concern like national security, politics and economic state of the nation.
- The indigenous minority religious identities are perceived as a threat to national security in Kenya. Such religious identities are feared as possible springboards for political rebellion based on the role that was played by the *Mau Mau* movement in the liberation struggle.
- There is increased demand for democracy, human rights and citizenship resulting from pleas from minority religious identities to be granted space in the nation state narration. Consequently, many civil communities and NGOs are demanding the respect of the dignity of all people in the nation-state including those of minority religious identities.

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